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AUTHOR Fehnel, Richard A.
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ABSTRACT

The Off-Campus Degree Program at Linfield College (Oregon) provides quality coursework to a group of part-time adult students who would not otherwise have access to a four-year degree program. In 1980, Linfield joined six other institutions to form the National University Consortium (NUC), the first national organization of colleges and universities, public broadcasting stations, and cable systems to offer television-assisted courses. NUC is governed and directed by all its member institutions and each plays an active role in determining NUC policy, curriculum offerings, and operations. Course materials, inspired by and adapted from the highly successful British Open University, are used. The Linfield courses can be used to satisfy major and elective requirements for the bachelor of science in management degree and the bachelor of arts in liberal studies degree offered through the Official Campus Program. Most courses are interdisciplinary in three degree areas: (1) technology and management; (2) behavioral and social sciences; and (3) humanities. Linfield's membership in NUC offers advantages to students, faculty, and administrators, and has been cost-effective, showing a net financial gain. (JW)

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The National University Consortium: An Assessment

by Richard A. Fehnel

CONTINUING HIGHER EDUCATION

Association for Continuing Higher Education

Fall 1982

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A long, hot summer brought to an end two major national efforts in use of television in continuing higher education. The 25-year effort by New York University and the Columbia Broadcasting System, "Sunrise Semester," was discontinued. Although the official announcement identified a lack of interest as the reason for stopping production and broadcast of the courses, a contributing reason was the increasing value of the early morning time for news and public affairs programs.

In the Midwest, the Board of Trustees of the University of Mid-America scrapped its plans for the American Open University and also announced plans to close its own shop by September 30, 1982. Both announcements created ripples in institutions of higher education which have been touched by the rhetoric of telecommunications, and prompted a request by the editor for an assessment of another national television project, the National University Consortium. It was prepared by the dean of continuing education at one of the institutions that works with the Consortium. He was assisted by staff of the Consortium.

Richard A. Fehnel is dean, Continuing Education and Off-Campus Programs, Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon 97128.

Like most four-year institutions, Linfield College (a small, private liberal arts college in McMinnville, Oregon) has been concerned about the predicted decline in student enrollments in the 1980s and the increasing costs of delivering high-quality education programs. In the face of these twin problems, Linfield has sought new ways to attract students and offer them high-quality instruction in cost-effective ways.

In 1980 a new organization, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and called the National University Consortium for Telecommunication in Teaching (NUC), offered Linfield just that kind of opportunity. In September of that year we joined six other institutions in the first national organization of colleges and universities, public broadcasting stations, and cable systems to offer television-assisted courses for adult learners.

For Linfield, participation in this innovative approach to delivering quality programs to highly motivated, part-time adult students has been a rewarding experience from many points of view. From the student perspective, it provides an added dimension of flexibility in course scheduling, allows students to take a heavier load, thus completing their degree sooner, and it has improved the quality and diversity of course offerings.

From the faculty perspective, it has reduced preparation and delivery load without sacrificing quality, and has improved the availability of high quality resource materials for courses.

From the administrative perspective, it allowed Linfield to offer a new major (in management) without entailing a long developmental process of course preparation, enabled us to serve a broader geographic area with improved efficiency, and gave Linfield a higher level of visibility. It is bringing highly motivated, top quality students to the Off-Campus Degree Program of Linfield College.

The Consortium

As one of seven pilot institutions, Linfield has participated in the development of the Consortium, considered by many to be the best opportunity in this country for adaptation and use of technology in higher education. Guiding principles behind the organization — high standards, active participation by members, and flexibility — have contributed significantly to its success.

(Over)

This 1982-83 academic year, NUC will have 17 institutional and 22 broadcasting station members. With a two-year renewal grant of over $737,000 from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, NUC expects to reach, if not exceed, its four-year goal of 35 institutions and 40 television stations or cable systems. Student enrollments at participating institutions have increased dramatically, jumping 83 percent from Fall 1980-81 to Fall 1981-82, and are expected to increase significantly again this Fall.

To maintain standards, the Consortium screens applicants for membership with great care to ensure that there is a high degree of institutional commitment and an ability to deliver the courses and attract students. In addition, Consortium course materials, inspired by and adapted from the highly successful British Open University, are intellectually challenging and current in each discipline.

Flexibility and participation are fostered by the structure of the Consortium which builds upon the present strengths of the American higher education and broadcasting systems. NUC is governed and directed by all its member institutions and each plays an active role in determining NUC policy, curriculum offerings, and operations.

Once accepted for membership, participating institutions make all major decisions. All participating institutions receive a full set of course materials in advance of the date for broadcast of the first television lessons. Faculty committees at each school adapt and modify the course materials according to their own needs. At Linfield all courses are reviewed by the appropriate departments and approved by the Curriculum Committee of the college.

Each institution decides how much credit a course should be granted (values are only suggested by the Consortium) and what place it should have in the curriculum. The institution also selects faculty to monitor the students' progress; decides whether students and tutor will work together in person, by phone, or by mail; administers examinations; and grants degrees.

NUC Courses and Materials

NUC offers a guided study learning system that uses structured reading and supplementary television lessons. Students learn on their own by working with materials that guide them through each step of the learning process.

Each student uses a study guide and a series of unit texts, taking self-assessment exercises in every unit. Additional texts, essentially the required readings for the traditional course, are required. Students use a detailed week-by-week syllabus which identifies reading and written assignments. Television broadcasts supplement the reading and are usually televised bi-weekly.

Student work is assessed in three different ways: nongraded self-assessment exercises; written graded assignments; and a comprehensive written examination.

At some of the participating institutions, each course has one or more learning centers or discussion groups in which students generally meet once every two weeks for a period of three to six hours. The meeting time and locations are largely determined by student preferences. At other institutions, students are required to maintain regular contact with the course instructor by toll-free phone and correspondence. At Linfield about one-third of our NUC students last year used this system, and they and the faculty found it to be generally satisfactory.

The University of Mid-America evolved from an effort by the University of Nebraska which was called State University of Nebraska (SUN). It expanded to include higher education interests in adjacent states and took on the name of University of Mid-America. Efforts to create the American Open University began in 1979. Critical to the decision to abandon plans and close the University of Mid-America was the negative response from National Institute of Education to a proposal for additional funds.

The television lessons of Linfield courses are shown on Oregon Educational Public Broadcasting System (OEPBS) which covers 85 percent of the state. Times are negotiated by Linfield and OEPBS. All lessons are repeated on Sunday mornings between 10 a.m. and noon.

The Linfield courses can be used to satisfy major and elective requirements for the bachelor of science in management degree and the bachelor of arts in liberal studies degree which are offered through our Official Campus Program. Because we admit students who already have 60 semester hours of credit, adults can satisfy all degree requirements using exclusively the courses based in the NUC materials.

Most courses are interdisciplinary in three degree areas: technology and management; behavioral and social sciences; and humanities.

Courses are usually staffed by regular Linfield faculty on an overload basis. One course, "Systems Management," was taught by an adjunct faculty member who was monitored by a full-time faculty member who had earlier taught the course. Staffing with regular Linfield faculty is a vital part of the development of our NUC relationship for it assures faculty knowledge of and support of the program and increases their likelihood of participation in NUC course development.

Success Criteria

Our experience and that of other pilot-year participants suggests several general criteria that all colleges and universities participating in the National University Consortium must satisfy if they are to successfully initiate a program.

Market. First, there must be a market of qualified students. By this I mean a pool of qualified persons in a geographic area within which your institution is known and has a good reputation. Qualified persons are those who fit the British Open University pattern of success: highly-motivated,

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self directed and disciplined, and who really like to learn by reading. This pool does not have to be big, as our experience demonstrates. The area does not have to be compact; we serve students from the Pacific Ocean to the Oregon-Idaho border — a distance of over 300 miles. Within Oregon, Linfield College is a familiar name having been established 132 years ago.

Product. Second, there must be a degree program into which NUC courses can fit. The degree program must be genuinely structured for working adults. That means the coursework should have content that is appealing and must be conveniently offered. There should also be a process for evaluating the "prior learning" many adults have acquired, and crediting this learning toward degree requirements. And, there should be an advising system that is easily used.

The degree program should be well-established at the time an institution joins the NUC. The importance of the pre-existing program is that it provides a pool of students to enroll in NUC courses, and a base of operations and legitimacy within the college or university to which the NUC program can be added.

Delivery. The third essential criterion is a delivery capability. This includes a television transmission partner who will give you good air time (including repeat broadcast) and promotional spots. It also includes your best faculty as teachers or tutors for the courses.

Promotion. Fourth, there must be an effective public information and promotion effort. A public information office with experience in recruiting adults and an advertising and promotion budget of at least $5,000 are key ingredients.

Staff. A final vital component is the staff. Support staff are vital in answering a broad range of questions about your degree program and the NUC courses, doing a preliminary screening of potential students, advising already matriculated students, and getting a fast turnaround on printed materials that are sent to potential students.

Also needed is an administrator who has full responsibility for integrating the NUC program into the existing degree program. This has to be a senior person with the full support of faculty and administrative colleagues.

Economic Viability

A primary concern that Linfield faced in the pilot year was whether or not our participation was economically viable. Could we attract enough students to cover costs.

Economic viability is a function of enrollments, tuition, and costs. From the cost point of view, the Consortium has been structured so that massive enrollments are not required for financial stability. The annual NUC membership fee is $10,000. An additional instructional service fee of $35 per student helps to cover the costs of local broadcast facilities, British Open University films, and new course development.

Although the cost may seem high at first glance, the typical four-year college or university can generate enough revenue to support the program by enrolling about 74 students per semester. Reduced rates are available to individual institutions for an experimental first-year membership, and to state systems or consortia.

Our final enrollment in the NUC courses in Fall 1980 was 53 students. Twenty-five of these were students already matriculated in Linfield's Off-Campus Degree Program, which shows the importance of the pre-existing program as a source of students for NUC courses. The other 28 were new students, 27 of whom were educationally inactive prior to enrolling in the NUC courses because they could not find coursework to fit their work schedule or that led to a degree. This figure shows the potential of the NUC program in attracting new students to an institution.

In short, the National University Consortium is making it possible for Linfield's Off-Campus Degree Program to provide course work of exceptional quality to a group of adult learners in Oregon who would otherwise not have access to a four-year degree program. Further, membership in the Consortium is providing some of our faculty with the opportunity for participation in the development of new courses which will have national use. And finally, these benefits are being realized at a net financial gain to the institution.

Our final Spring semester enrollment figure in 1981 in the NUC courses was 55 students. Twenty-five of these were new students, educationally inactive prior to enrolling. Ten were students who had been new in the Fall. With only one exception, all of the other new Fall semester students stayed in our Off-Campus Program, taking regular evening courses. Twenty of the 55 students in Spring were "old" students in Linfield's Off-Campus Program, which again underscores the importance of a pre-existing program.

During the first year we spent over $33,000 in costs associated with NUC courses and collected over $49,000 in tuition from these courses. Because this was a pilot year, we did not have to pay the annual membership fee of $10,000, but even if that had been necessary, we would have been able to show revenues in excess of direct costs.

In Fall 1981 our enrollments were up 37 percent. Estimated revenues from NUC courses were approximately $30,000, and expenditures, including partial payment of the consortium membership fee, were about $20,000, leaving a balance of approximately $10,000 for one semester of NUC courses.

Benefits of NUC Membership

In short, the National University Consortium is making is possible for Linfield's Off-Campus Degree Program to provide coursework of exceptional quality to a group of adult learners in Oregon who would otherwise not have access to a four-year degree program. Further, membership in the Consortium is providing some of our faculty with the opportunity for participating in the development of new courses which will have a national use. And finally, these benefits are being realized at a net financial gain to the institution. #

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